Monk, Artist, Philosopher and Challenger: A Personal Account on the Life of Bhanteji Nagasena Bhikkhu

By Jotika Khur-Yearn, PhD

The life journey of Venerable Phramaha Nagaseana Bhikkhu, 1938-2017, is an interesting and remarkable one. He was born and brought up in India. Still at young age, he went to Thailand to be ordained as a Buddhist monk and was trained under a famous Thai monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. He was then sent to the West for Buddhist missionary works. He lived his late life mostly in London, where he was an abbot of a Buddhist temple, with major support from Thai Buddhist communities.

Venerable Bhanteji Nagasena also had some distinctive characters. He possessed in-depth knowledge of Buddhism and was also keen to other subject areas such as art, psychology and philosophies. He was also fluent in several languages including Hindi, English, Thai and Pali. Also notably he was an outspoken person, who dared to speak out his mind openly and loudly. Perhaps this is the main source of troubles he often faced with people within his own circles.

In this article, I would like to share my personal account on the life journey of Venerable Nagasena

Bhikkhu as I knew him through my experience in working with him for about four years between 1999 and 2003.

I first met Venerable Nagasena in July 1999 at Plaistow Buddha Vihara, a Buddhist temple in east London (now defunct and its building property was taken over by another Buddhist organisation), where he was then Head and Abbot of the temple. It was also my first trip from Asia to the UK (In fact in the West) to work as a volunteer for Buddhist missions at the temple, and I have spent most of my life in the UK ever since. Looking back, my chance of meeting with Ven. Nagasena and working with him is probably one of the rarest occasions to happen. The chance came through a friend of mine, who also had a rare chance of meeting Nagasena through his friend's father who then knew Nagasena for some time.

Back in 1997-98, through the invitation of Ven. Nagasena and support of his Thai devotees, there were a number of monks from Thailand staying at the Plaistow Buddha Vihara, but in late 1998 some of them returned to Thailand and only four monks, including Ven. Nagasena and my friend, Ven. Phramaha Cirabandhu Kamonsen, who was there two years before me, remained at the temple. The other two monks were Phra Worawit and Phra Worarit. Thus, the temple needed more monks to stay at the temple and help with daily activities there. Hence, Nagasena, after consultation with Cirabandhu, invited me and another friend, Ven. Nandamedha, to the temple. At that time, both Nandamedha and I were in Sri Lanka, just completed our

postgraduate studies in Buddhism there. So, there were six monks at the temple from mid 1999 through to early 2001. Three more monks arrived in the following two years, namely, Ven. Phramaha Somchai Cittagutto, who later became the founder and abbot of the Wat Buddharam London, Ven. Phramaha Phichit, and Ven. Phra Somsak, the latter arrived at the temple after one of the monks there returned to Thailand in 2002. Of these monks, only Ven. Phramaha Somchai who held a diplomatic type of Thai passport, which is officially recognised by the Thai Sangha Supreme Council for the Thai Buddhist missionary abroad. These are some legacies of missionary works and monks under the leadership of Ven. Nagasena at the Plaistow Buddha Vihara during the six years with full of events and activities going on there between 1997 and 2003.

One of the most notable and beautiful memories of my time at the temple was the diversity of cultures and multiethnicity of people from different backgrounds. It was one of a few Buddhist temples in the UK with such a great diversity of members and supporters. While the majority of its devotees were from Thai communities, there were also many devotees from Laotian communities. Members and friends of the temple from other ethnic backgrounds include English, Shan, Burmese, Indian, Chinese, French, Sinhalese, Bangladeshi, Turkish, German, Vietnamese, Pakistani and Nepalese, to name a few of those native language speakers as I remember them. It was a small temple with such great diversity and multi cultures. Remarkably we had two GP doctors and a

dentist, who had run their own clinics, among supporters of the temple. Hence, when a monk needed a medical check, they would visit the temple with their medical stuff rather than the monk visiting their clinics.

It was also notable that the monks at the temple spoke several languages. Ven. Nagasena himself spoke Thai and English as fluently as speaking in his mother tongue, Hindi language. He also had in depth knowledge of Pali and Sanskrit languages in which early Buddhist texts were written down and preserved. Obviously, because the majority of its supporters were Thai, Ven. Nagasena had probably preached in Thai more than he did in English. He often said that he felt he was Thai but born to an Indian family! The monks whose mother tongue was Kham Murng, the northern Thai dialect, or Shan, could also pick up the Laotian language and communicate with members of the Laotian community, as those three languages are like brothers and sisters.

Another remarkable thing I would like to mention here is the distinctive character of Ven. Nagasena. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, he was a learned monk possessing in depth knowledge of Buddhism. His most notable intellectual work is the translation of a book on meditation entitled *Mindfulness of Breathing*, originally written in Thai by his teacher, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. He also had other distinctive characters and talents. He liked comparing the Buddha's teachings with those of other religions or philosophies or findings through science. He liked following research

findings including TV programmes on subjects such as ghost or spirit worlds and the worlds after death. We would listen to him talking about certain acting scenes in science or adventuring movies such as Star Trek and comparing them with the Buddha's teachings. As for the legacy of his art works, there are Buddha statues made by Ven. Nagasena, including a big one in the garden of the temple and other places where he used to live.

With all the qualities of talents and skills of the monks along with generous and strong support from devotees, as one could imagine, the temple was so atmospheric and lively. It was busy with lots of cultural and educational activities, starting from daily routines, such as morning and evening chanting; weekly programmes such as Thai language classes for children and meditation classes for adults, to seasonal events, such as new year events and other cultural festivals. So, the administration of the temple was going on well, at least it seemed to be so from an outsider's view.

But, from an insider's experience, there was a deep-rooted problem there long before the Thai monks arrived at the temple, followed by Thai devotees. That problem was a dispute between members of an organisation that owned the building property of the temple. The organisation is called Ambedkar International Mission, a registered charity organisation in England. We were told that Ven. Nagasena was both Chair of the administration committee for the organisation and residential monk of the temple. Since there were disputes among members

of the committee, Ven. Nagasena found supporters from members of Thai, Lao and other Buddhist communities to support him running daily activities at the temple, and that was how the Thai monks were invited to stay there. Knowing that there were disputes inside the committee, generous Buddhists including the monks were there to help and support for a good cause of running the temple and never wanted to be involved in the disputes. But they also found themselves in difficult situations. Some Thai devotees tried to help finding ways for resolution of the disputes but the problem got worse. Hence a new plan or plan B came out at a time much needed that some of the monks, such as Ven. Phramaha Somchai Cittagutto, who would become the founding abbot of Wat Buddharam, Ven. Phra Anand Nandamedha, and Ven. Cirabandhu Kamonsen decided to move out from the temple and establish a new one. Ven. Nagasena himself agreed with this plan, and that's how the seed was sown for a new Buddhist charity organisation with the establishment of a new Buddhist temple that came to be known as Wat Buddharam (London) in 2005.

Thus, after some monks started establishing Wat Buddharam temple, Ven. Nagasena and a Thai monk remained there at the Plaistow Buddha Vihara to keep fighting for justice. But, in the end, they lost the court case and had to move out from the temple building. Ven. Nagasena himself ended up staying in council housing but he also kept challenging the dispute until his death. During these over ten years of difficult times, the monks at Wat Buddharam kept close in touch with Ven.

Nagasena. They visited him regularly, offering him support and necessities.

To sum up, Ven. Nagasena, as I knew him, was a distinctly talented Buddhist monk in many ways. He was a learned monk, artist, philosopher and challenger. He had done many great works on spreading the teaching of Buddhism and serving communities. But on the other side of his life, it is also incredible sadness that during his late years, Bhanteji Nagasena had experienced some difficult circumstances. I wish and pray for Bhanteji to have a new peaceful life wherever he may be and finally attain the highest state of peace, Nirvana.

22.06.2017

Note:
This article was published in the book entitled *The Life & Times of Ven. Nagasena Thera (1938-2017),* pp*. 17-22,* published by Wat Buddharam (London) in 2017.